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ABSTRACT

A study examined the nature of trait-like and situational communication apprehension on non-traditional undergraduate students enrolled in a two-year community college. Subjects were 323 students enrolled in general education requirements at a midwestern community college. Of these, 181 were 25 years or under and 142 were older, 212 were females and 111 were males, and the mean age of the subjects was 26.9. The Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (McCroskey, 1982), the Situational Communication Apprehension Measure (SCAM; McCroskey & Richmond, 1982), and several demographic questions were administered by instructors. Results indicated a significant difference between student type and situational communication apprehension, with higher levels reported by the traditional students; also, higher levels of communication apprehension were not found in non-traditional students. Findings suggest that while traditional students are at a transition point in their lives, from late adolescent to young adulthood, adult learners, too, are moving in, through, or out of many different life transitions. (Contains 19 references.) (Author/CR)

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An Investigation Into the Nature of Trait-like and Situational Communication Apprehension of Non-Traditional Undergraduate Students

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An Investigation Into the Nature of Trait-like and Situational Communication Apprehension of Non-Traditional Undergraduate Students

Abstract

This study investigated the nature of trait-like and situational communication apprehension on non-traditional undergraduate students. Results indicated that no significant differences were found between non-traditional and traditional students on trait-like communication apprehension, while significant differences were found between non-traditional and traditional students on situational communication apprehension. Discussion and interpretation of results and future issues for research on non-traditional students are explored.

An Investigation Into the Nature of Trait-like and Situational Communication Apprehension of Non-Traditional Undergraduate Students

Comparative studies of adult learners and traditiona undergraduate students have shown important differences in these two student groups, differences which may have implications for instructors regarding the way they need to interact in the classroom (Comadena, Semlak & Escott, 1992). Given tha' communication apprehension is a determinant of student success (McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, & Payne, 1989), the focus of this study is to examine communication apprehension levels of traditional and non-traditional students enrolled in a two-year community college.

Communication apprehension as a factor related to student success (McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, & Payne, 1989) has made the role that communication apprehension plays in shaping educational outcomes a major concern of instructional communication researchers (Powers & Smythe, 1980). Research conducted over the past twenty years has suggested that college student academic performance and learning are affected by student levels of communication apprehension (Bettini & Robinson, 1990). McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, and Payne (1989) found that communication apprehension has its strongest impact during the first two years of college. Furthermore, research in classroom communication apprehension has demonstrated that anxiety is a primary concern that students report they experience in the classroom (Neer, 1987; Neer & Kircher, 1989). Finally, research by Smyth and Powers (1978) and Powers and Smythe (1980) concluded that communication

apprehension is a potentially powerful determinant of the perceptions and expectations which teachers form for their students' performance. Their findings indicate that high communication apprehensive students are perceived by teachers as having less success potential and that teachers detect and respond differentially to students as a function of the students' communication behaviors. Teachers expect the low CA student to establish better interpersonal relationships with others, have greater success in their careers, and to perform better in educational endeavors than the highly apprehensive student.

These findings have a particularly important implication for today's college students as in recent years enrollment trends in institutions of higher education have drastically changed as a result of changes in the American society. There are now vast numbers of non-traditional, adult learners enrolled in these institutions (Crimmer & Riddler, 1985). Census Bureau statistics project that in the year 1995, 66% of all incoming freshmen will be non-traditional students (deBlois, 1992). Non-traditional, adult learners, who experience the changing role of "going back to school", may question their identity and abilities, and may be unable to adequately communicate their anxiety. Due to the inability to express their needs or anxieties in the classroom, the quality of learning for the non-traditional student may be inhibited. For the purposes of this study, a non-traditional student is defined as being "greater than 25" years of age while a traditional student is defined as "less than or equal to 25" years of age (Hybertson, Hulme, Smith, & Holton, 1992).

Since the impact of communication apprehension on traditional college students has received considerable attention in the classroom environment (McCroskey & Andersen, 1976; Neer, 1987; Neer & Kircher, 1989; Scott & Wheeless, 1977) and given the rising number of non-traditional students presently attending college, research exploring the impact of CA on this student population is warranted. Thus, this study posits the following research questions:

RQ1: Is there a significant difference in degrees of trait-like communication apprehension between non-traditional undergraduate college students and traditional undergraduate college students as measured by the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (McCroskey, 1982)?

RQ2: Is there a significant difference in degrees of situational communication apprehension between non-traditional undergraduate college students and traditional undergraduate college students as measured by the Situational Communication Apprehension Measure (McCroskey & Richmond, 1982)?

METHOD

Sample and Procedures

The sample for this study consisted of 323 undergraduate students enrolled in general education requirements at a mid-western Community College. Of the 323 undergraduate students sampled, 181 (56%) of these were aged less than or equal to 25 years of age and, thus, designated as the traditional group, whereas 142 (44%) were aged greater than 25 years of age, and thus, considered the non-traditional group. In terms of gender representation, 212 were females (65.6%) and 111 were males (34.4%). The mean age of the subjects was 26.9.

Instructors of general education courses, teaching undergraduate adult learners and traditional undergraduate students, were asked to administer a questionnaire packet containing: the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (McCroskey, 1982); the Situational Communication Apprehension Measure (SCAM; McCroskey & Richmond, 1982); and several demographic questions. The subjects were informed by the instructor that participation was strictly voluntary and anonymity was assured. They were also told about the nature of the study after all data was collected.

Measurement of Variables

Trait-like CA was measured with the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (McCroskey, 1982), a 24-item 5 point Likert-type instrument that

measures trait-like communication apprehension in four contexts: 1) group discussion; 2) meeting or class; 3) dyadic; and 4) public speaking. The subjects completed the instrument concerning their feelings about communicating with other people in general.

The Cronbach alpha reliability for the total score of the PRCA-24 was .94 with a mean of 66.58 and a standard deviation of 17.49. This mean is consistent with previous studies which have reported means of 69.26 (Bochar & Seiler, 1982), 65.6 (McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, & Payne, 1989), and 61.20 (Rubin & Rubin, 1989).

The means, standard deviations, and Cronbach alpha reliabilities for the four sub-scores of the PRCA-24 were as follows: dyadic CA (M = 15.07, SD = 4.80, alpha = .87), group CA (M = 15.28, SD = 5.02, alpha = .87), meeting CA (M = 16.49, SD = 5.33, alpha = .90), public speaking CA (M = 19.74, SD = 5.48, alpha = .86).

Situational CA was measured with the Situational Communication Apprehension Measure (SCAM), a 20-item 7 point Likert-type instrument (McCroskey & Richmond (1982). It is designed to measure apprehension while participating in a specific communication situation or talking with a specific audience, such as a student talking to a teacher (Richmond & McCroskey, 1992). In this study, subjects were asked to complete the instrument while reflected on their feelings about participation in the class in which they were completing the questionnaire. The Cronbach alpha reliability for the 20-item SCAM was .92 with a mean of 62.35 and a standard deviation of 21.27.

Statistical Analysis

The first research question posed in this study asked if there is a significant difference in degrees of trait-like communication apprehension between non-traditional undergraduate college students and traditional undergraduate college students. A Multivariate Analysis of Variance was used to test the combination of the four dimensions (dyadic, class or meeting, group discussion, and public speaking) on levels of student types. The second research question asked if there is a significant difference in degrees of situational communication apprehension between non-traditional undergraduate college students and traditional undergraduate college students. In order to answer this research question, an Analysis of Variance was performed. The alpha level of significance for all tests was set at .05.

RESULTS

Multivariate Analysis of Variance was used to test a linear combination of the four dimensions of communication apprehension on levels of student type and no significant difference was found ($F = .568$; $df = 4,318$; Pillais = .007; $p < .686$). Analysis of Variance was used to test for significant differences in degrees of situational communication apprehension between non-traditional undergraduate students and traditional undergraduate students. Results demonstrated a significant difference between student type and situational communication apprehension. Specifically, higher situational communication apprehension was reported by the traditional students ($F = 4.22$; $df = 1,321$; $p < .04$; $R^2 = .013$).

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of the Results

The analysis of research question one did not support the expectation that higher levels of communication apprehension would be found in non-traditional undergraduate students; however, the lack of statistical significance dictates some consideration. One possible explanation for this finding may be that the non-traditional or traditional students, or both groups, were at varying points in their college experience in terms of the number of credits taken. A post hoc analysis of variance was performed and found that the non-traditional students had earned significantly more credits than the traditional students ($F = 13.69$; $df = 1,233$; $p < .0001$; $R^2 = .06$). The mean number of credits earned for the traditional students ($N = 123$) was 27.85, and the mean number of credits earned for the non-traditional students ($N = 112$) was 39.88. Thus, it may be that having more college experience diluted any differences that may have emerged between the traditional and non-traditional students.

In addition, the conceptualization used in this study for the traditional undergraduate student (less than or equal to 25 years of age) and the non-traditional undergraduate student (greater than 25 years of age) may explain the finding of no significant difference on trait-like communication apprehension between the two groups of students. It may have been that having only one criteria in distinguishing between the traditional and non-traditional students was not adequate in differentiating the two groups. The amount of time out of school before returning to academia could be considered an important factor in the definition of a traditional and non-traditional

student. The results of a post hoc analysis of variance which was performed here indicate that non-traditional students reported being out of school longer ($F = 157.632$; $df = 1,214$; $p < .0001$; $R^2 = .42$). The mean number of years being out of school reported by traditional students was 2.60 (N = 83) and the mean number of years being out of school reported by non-traditional students was 12.96 (N = 133). Additionally, the criteria of reaching non-traditional students as soon as they return to school may be an important factor in measuring their apprehensions and college concerns.

The results of research question two indicated that a higher degree of situational communication apprehension was reported by the traditional students. This result may be explained in part by a post hoc analysis on the number of credits earned as previously mentioned in explaining research question one. Because individuals with situational communication apprehension may experience communication apprehension with a person or group at one time, but not at another time, some of the subjects in this study may have already overcome their high degrees of communication apprehension in the classroom by the accumulation of the number of credits earned. As the post hoc analysis confirmed, non-traditional subjects indicated having earned more credits (mean of 39.88 credits) than the traditional students (mean of 27.85 credits). Research from previous studies (Parks, 1980; Zakahi, Jordan, & Christophel, 1993) found that communication apprehension is higher when there is familiarity with the situation; in this study the number of credits earned indicates that the non-traditional subjects had more college experience than the traditional subjects who participated in this study, and thus, the non-traditional students may have overcome their high degrees of situational

communication apprehension in the classroom, but yet the traditional students may be somewhat apprehensive in the college environment.

In summary, traditional students and adult students are at a transition point in their lives (Polson, 1993). While traditional students are dealing with the transition from late adolescence to young adulthood, adult learners are moving in, moving through, or moving out of many different life transitions (Polson, 1993), such as family life changes, and job and career changes. The characteristics of these transitions play an important role in defining the make up of non-traditional students, thus, the question is raised concerning what impact these changes may have or communication issues related to the non-traditional student.

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